

very fitting relationship illustrates the depth of understanding that had developed from the kind of instruction he had experienced. Our strong hunch is that these words will be available to him in all facets of literacy.

During school assemblies, a rumble would go through the place in the auditorium where the class in which we had implemented our vocabulary approach was sitting when a speaker mentioned one of the words they had learned. Some examples include when a newspaper reporter was introduced as a *journalist*, when the principal asked particular students to stand to be *commended* for some accomplishment, in a safety discussion when the crossing guard told the students they shouldn't be *meandering* across the street. At first, the principal and some of the other teachers were a little disturbed about the behavior of the class, but when they found out that the reason behind it was the students' excitement in learning new words, they were impressed. In fact, the art teacher got a copy of the word list and began sprinkling the words into her conversations with the target class, and she was delighted with the results.

Very recently, we drew on our earlier experiences with vocabulary instruction for students in the intermediate grades to create instruction for children in the earliest grades that introduced sophisticated words to the children and developed their ability to use the words. The new vocabulary work was done under a larger research and development project, which we call Text Talk (Beck & McKeown, 2001; McKeown & Beck, in press), and will describe in Chapter 4. The teachers who implemented the Text Talk vocabulary instruction reported the children's excitement with vocabulary. And we saw it again for ourselves in our new work. Our favorite recent anecdote is about the first grader who reported to his teacher, "I told my mother that I was going to act more *mature*, and she took me to Toys R Us."

Our goal in this book is to support teachers in their development of vocabulary instruction that is targeted to getting the kinds of effects captured in the anecdotes. We hope that the pages that follow enable teachers to build the understanding, the motivation, and the resources to do that.

## [ CHAPTER 2 ]

# Choosing Words to Teach

The teacher's edition for a fourth-grade anthology suggests teaching the following words before inviting students to read an excerpt from *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952): *comfort*, *cunning*, *endure*, *friendless*, *frolic*, *lonely*, *soaked*, and *stealthily*. Why do you think these words were selected? One obvious reason for selecting words to teach is that students do not know the words. Although *cunning*, *endure*, *frolic*, and *stealthily* are probably unfamiliar to most fourth graders, *comfort*, *friendless*, *lonely*, and *soaked* are probably not. Familiarity does not seem to be the principle used to make the selection. What about importance or usefulness? Are the selected words useful for writing or talking? Would the words be important to know because they appear in other texts with a high degree of frequency? Some—but not all—of the words might be considered useful or important. Thus, the question remains: Why were the words selected? The purpose of this chapter is to consider what principles might be used for selecting words to teach.

## USEFUL WORDS

As a way to begin thinking about which words to teach, consider that words in the language have different levels of utility. In this regard, we have found our notion of tiers, as discussed in Chapter 1, to be one helpful lens through which to consider words for instructional attention. Recall that Tier One consists of the most basic words—*clock*,

to upset their pleasant living situation. If one other word were to be selected, a good choice would be *merchant*. *Merchant* is a word that comes up in fourth- and fifth-grade social studies textbooks in discussions of colonization of the Americas (e.g., “European *merchants* were eager to locate new resources like tobacco and indigo which could be found in the colonies”; or “Colonial *merchants* were dismayed by the taxes on English goods which meant higher prices for their customers but no more profit for themselves”).

The other candidate words, *tend*, *required*, *performed*, and *maintain*, are also words of strong general utility, and the choice of whether to include any more words is based solely on considering how many words one thinks students can usefully handle.

### • You Try It •

Below is another excerpt from the tale about the donkey under the magical spell described above (Kohnke, 2001, p. 12). You might find it useful to try your hand at identifying Tier Two words. You will get to see our choices below the excerpt, so that you can compare your selections with ours.

*The servants would never comment on this strange occurrence [finding the kitchen clean even though none of them were seen doing the cleaning], each servant hoping the other had tended to the chores. Never would they mention the loud noises they'd hear emerging from the kitchen in the in middle of the night. Nor would they admit to pulling the covers under their chins as they listened to the sound of haunting laughter that drifted down the halls to their bedrooms each night. In reality, they knew there was a more sinister reason behind their good fortune.*

Which words did you select? Trying to be all-inclusive, selecting any words that might fit Tier Two, we chose *comment*, *occurrence*, *tended*, *mention*, *emerging*, *admit*, *haunting*, *reality*, *sinister*, and *fortune*. We considered them Tier Two words as we viewed them as fairly “general but sophisticated words.” That is, they are not the most basic or common ways of expressing ideas, but they are familiar to mature language users as ordinary as opposed to specialized language. The con-

cepts embodied in each word are ones that students already have some understanding of, as shown in the accompanying list.

### Tier Two words

*comment*  
*occurrence*  
*tended*  
*mention*  
*emerging*  
*admit*  
*haunting*  
*reality*  
*sinister*  
*fortune*

### Students' likely expressions

something someone has to say  
something happening  
took care of  
tell  
coming out  
to say you did something  
scary  
being real  
scary  
luck

Now, the notion of tiers of words is not a precise one, and the lines between tiers are not clear-cut, so your selection may not match ours. Thinking in terms of tiers is just a starting point—a way of framing the task of choosing candidate words for instruction (see the accompanying box). Even within Tier Two, some words will be more easily familiar and some will be more useful than others. For example, our hunch is that *admit*, *reality*, and *fortune* are likely known to most fourth or fifth graders; that *tended* is not often used in a way that is key to understanding; and that fifth graders may already associate *haunting* with scary things—a Halloween context—

### Some Criteria for Identifying Tier Two Words

- *Importance and utility:* Words that are characteristic of mature language users and appear frequently across a variety of domains.
- *Instructional potential:* Words that can be worked with in a variety of ways so that students can build rich representations of them and of their connections to other words and concepts.
- *Conceptual understanding:* Words for which students understand the general concept but provide precision and specificity in describing the concept.

and are consistent with Tier Two words. The words in the second column—*obsessed*, *detest*, and *despise*—are most substantively related to the plot of the story, which is about a father who is obsessed with bugs and his daughter who detests and despises them. *Detest* and *despise* create a kind of “two-fer” situation, in that they are very close synonyms that could be introduced together and used interchangeably.

The rest of the words do not play key roles in the story, nor is their unfamiliarity likely to interfere with comprehension. So, which other words are attended to, if any, is simply a matter of choice and convenience. That is, a decision as to the number of words taught might be made on the basis of how many a teacher wants to make room for at the moment. Factors in this decision may include, for example, how large the current vocabulary load is in the classroom, the time of year, and the number and difficulty of other concepts presently being dealt with in the curriculum.

Assume that there is room for several more words from this story. It might be convenient to teach *splendid* and *shuddered*, because they could take advantage of concepts already established for the story. *Shuddered* fits well, since something that is detested might well make one shudder. *Splendid* is also a good fit, as in: “Bea’s dad thinks bugs are splendid, but Bea detests them.” Or “If you’re obsessed about something, you might think it’s splendid.” These two words would also be favored because they have a bit more dimension to them than *mumble*, *muttered*, or *hurl*. This is not to say that *mumble*, *muttered*, or *hurl* should not be taught, but simply that, presented with the choice of words to work with, *splendid* and *shuddered* seem to lend themselves to a wider diversity of possible uses.

### WHAT IF THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH WORDS?

Now let us consider a text that does not seem to offer much for vocabulary development because all of the words in the text are familiar to students. An approach in such a case could be selecting words whose concepts fit in with the story even though the words do not appear. For example, if the story features a character who is a loner, introduce the words *hermit*, *isolated*, or *solitary*; if a problem is dealt with, present it as a *dilemma* or *conflict*; if a character is hardworking, consider if

he or she is *diligent* and *conscientious*. Think in terms of words that coordinate with, expand, or play off of words, situations, or characters in a text.

Bringing in words whose concepts fit with a story is especially salient when young children are just learning to read and there are only the simplest words in their text. Consider a story in which two children (Pam and Matt) try on a number silly hats, some of which are very big and two of which are exactly alike. A number of words came to mind, and we chose *absurd*, *enormous*, and *identical*. Next we suggest how those words might be introduced to young children:

- In the story, Pam and Matt had very, very silly hats. Another way to say that something is very, very silly is to say that it is *absurd*. When something is *absurd*, it is so silly it’s hard to believe.
- Some of the hats that Pam and Matt wore were so big that all you could see were their feet. Another way to say that something is very, very big is to say that it is *enormous*. *Enormous* means “very big—very, very big.”
- Pam and Matt put on red hats that were almost exactly alike. A way to say that two things are exactly alike is to say that they are *identical*. *Identical* means “exactly alike.”

Words don’t need to be completely unfamiliar to students in order to be good candidates for instructional attention. Words might be selected for attention that may be familiar to students but which illustrate the power of an author’s choice of words to reveal information about a character or situation. For example, notice the underlined words in the following excerpt, which is taken from a sixth-grade unit on Egypt (Banks et al., 1997, p. 87). The topic is Hatshepsut, a female pharaoh.

#### Hatshepsut

*Hatshepsut was a princess and the wife of a pharaoh. She seized the chance to become pharaoh herself when her husband died. Her young stepson was supposed to become the new pharaoh of Egypt. Hatshepsut proclaimed, however, that the ten-year-old boy was too young to rule on his own. In this way she succeeded in being named co-ruler.*

the synonym *wealthy*. The reason for attention to these two words is that they could cause confusion at the local level in the story if not understood.

Two other words were also chosen because they could cause confusion in a part of the story. These are *upshot* and *disinterested*. The narrator talks of the *upshot* of his decision to tell Sylvia that he saw a vision of her fiancé choking her. Because of the context and feel of the story, we thought *upshot* might be interpreted as some sort of physical violence, instead of simply “the result of.” The word *disinterested* meaning “not being involved in a particular situation” is often confused with *uninterested*, meaning “not interested,” and the story provides a good opportunity to introduce that distinction.

Five words seem to convey the mood and emotional impact of story developments: *devoted*, *entrenched*, *inevitable*, *sobering*, and *revelation*. And the word *essential* was chosen because “one essential detail” turns out to be a key plot device—that is, in his premonition, the narrator notices a scar on the left side of the choker’s face. The essential detail he fails to account for is that he is seeing this in a mirror, so the scar is actually on the right. The five words can be used to describe the plot as follows: The narrator is *devoted* to Sylvia, although *entrenched* in a jealousy that causes *inevitable* problems. Only a *sobering revelation* (that *essential* detail) saves him, his marriage, and his wife.

A couple of points should be emphasized here. The words were selected not so much because they are essential to comprehension of the story but because they seem most closely integral to the mood and plot. In this way, the vocabulary work provides both for learning new words and for enriching understanding of literature. This decision was made possible because there was a large pool of words from which to choose. Sometimes choices are more limited, and sometimes the best words are not so tied to the story. In such cases, a decision might be made to select words that seem most productive for vocabulary development despite their role in the story.

For the six words we consider to be most important to teach, some characteristics of the words themselves also drove our selections. *Sobering* was selected because its strongest sense for students might be as the opposite of drunk. So, the context of the story provides a good opportunity to overcome that and introduce its more general sense. The others, *essential*, *devoted*, *entrenched*, *inevitable*, and *revelation*, have wide

potential for use and are not limited to specific situations or stereotypical contexts. Yet, they seem to be strongly expressive words that can bring emotional impact to contexts in which they are used.

## AN EXAMPLE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

We turn now to selecting words to enhance the vocabulary repertoires of young children—those who are just learning to read. We make two immediate distinctions between vocabulary work with intermediate and older students and work with students in the earliest grades, typically kindergarten through early second grade. The first is that we consider the best sources for new vocabulary to be trade books that teachers read aloud to children rather than the books children read on their own. In Chapter 4 we will make our case for that position. The second distinction is that in contrast to introducing words before a story, in our work with young children we have found it most appropriate to engage in vocabulary activities after a story has been read.

There are two reasons we decided that vocabulary activities for young children should occur after a story. First, if a word is needed for comprehension, since the teacher is reading the story she is available to briefly explain the word at the point in the story where it is needed (e.g., “A *ukulele* is a kind of guitar”; or “When ducks *molt*, they lose their feathers and can’t fly until new ones grow”). Second, since the words that will be singled out for vocabulary attention are words that are very likely unfamiliar to young children, the context from the story provides a rich example of the word’s use and thus strong support for the children’s initial learning of the word.

The basis for selecting words from trade books for young children is that they are Tier Two words and words that are not too difficult to explain to young children. Here, we present our thinking for selecting three words for instructional attention from *The Popcorn Dragon* (Thayer, 1953), a story targeted to kindergartners.

In our review of *The Popcorn Dragon* for Tier Two candidate words, we first identified the following seven: *accidentally*, *drowsy*, *pranced*, *scorched*, *envious*, *delighted*, and *forlorn*. From the pool of seven, we decided to provide instruction for three: *envious*, *delighted*, and *forlorn*. We considered three issues in making our choices. First, we determined

Keep in mind that there is no formula for selecting age-appropriate vocabulary words despite lists that identify “fifth-grade words” or “seventh-grade words.” As long as the word can be explained in known words and can apply to what students might talk or write about, it is an appropriate word to teach.

▪ **Your Turn** ▪

We invite you to use what you have learned in this chapter to make some decisions about which words you will teach.

1. Select a text that your students will be reading. It can be a story, or an excerpt from a chapter book or novel, or a social studies textbook.
2. List all the words that are likely to be unfamiliar to students.
3. Analyze the word list:
  - Which words can be categorized as Tier Two words?
  - Which of the Tier Two words are most necessary for comprehension?
  - Are there other words needed for comprehension? Which ones?
4. On the basis of your analysis, which words will you teach?
  - Which will need only brief attention?
  - Which will you give more elaborate attention to?

## CHAPTER 3

# Introducing Vocabulary

**M**s. T's classroom, Monday morning:

Ms. T: Our first vocabulary word is *covet*. Sam, what does *covet* mean?

SAM: (*reading from the dictionary/glossary*) “To wish for greatly or with envy.”

Ms. T: Okay. So, if someone has a CD, and you really wish you had it, we might say that you covet the CD. Let's look at the next word. . . .

Ms. T's classroom, Thursday morning:

MARIA: (*reading from a story*) “As much as Philip liked his new bike, he coveted his cousin's shiny scooter.”

Ms. T: *Covet* is one of our vocabulary words. Who remembers what it means? Terry?

TERRY: No response.

Ms. T: Alex?

ALEX: Umm . . .

Ms. T: Alison?

ALISON: Uh, I think, like making a wish. He made a wish to get a scooter, but his parents got him a bike instead.